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ABSTRACT

There are a plethora of ways which may be used to ascertain learner achievement in reading. This paper discusses such procedures. Comprehensive teacher observation of reading, using quality criteria, can be an excellent approach to assess reading progress. Selected criteria are discussed. Six categories of word recognition skills are important. Reading comprehension, with its different levels of complexity, is also critical, and can be assessed through teacher observation. Portfolios that include well-chosen items may also indicate student progress and achievement in reading. State mandated reading tests offer certain strengths, but also have much need for improvement. A plethora of problems are involved with using tests results from mandated testing for punishment to "get schools in line." (Contains 12 references.) (SR)

Testing and Evaluating Student Achievement in Reading.

by Marlow Ediger

TESTING AND EVALUATING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN READING

Teachers and administrators desire to know how much students have achieved in reading instruction. There are a plethora of ways which may be used to ascertain learner achievement in reading. Educators need to work continually in attempting to find the best ways to measure and evaluate student reading achievement. Selected procedures will now be discussed.

Teacher Observation of Reading Achievement

Perhaps, the oldest form of assessing learner reading achievement is to use comprehensive teacher observation. Quality criteria used by the teacher can be an excellent way to assess reading progress. The emphasis here is upon using careful teacher observation with inherent criteria of excellence. The reading teacher may wish to devise a checklist with the involved student's name on each. He/she may then observe and record objectives which learners should attain on the checklist. The teacher's impressions for each student may also be written in journal form. Each entry should be dated. Which are selected criteria to be used by the teacher to assess student behavior in reading (See Ediger, 1999, 38-40)?

1. word recognition. There are diverse skills which students need to use in identifying unknown words. Highly proficient readers , no doubt, have mastered these skills when reading fluently with excellent comprehension. Others, regardless of grade levels will have selected deficiencies in identifying words. There are appropriate categories to list on the checklist such as students using

a) phonics successfully to unlock unknown words. Specific

problems may be listed which cause these difficulties including lack of associating grapheme/phoneme relationships, learning to read words by sight which do not follow a sound/symbol correspondence, as well as being able to identify parts within words which do/do not follow a pattern of spelling involving phonetic elements.

b) structural analysis to identify unknown words. Structural analysis skills need to be understood and known by the student to make it easier to identify unknown words. Thus, there are common prefixes and suffixes to be taught which when met up with in print discourse, the reader can separate these prefixes and suffixes from the base word, making it possible to recognize the unknown. Common prefixes are "un," "ir," "ex," "trans," among others.

c) syllabication skills in that when a student cannot identify a word while reading, he/she may divide the unknown into syllables. Many times, the student can then identify the unknown word in print.

d) context clues in that the reader may try a word which may fit in as a possible choice for the unknown. The word chosen must make sense with the rest of the words in the sentence being read. Sometimes, more than one sentence needs to be read to ascertain the unknown word.

e) picture clues, especially for young readers, may provide the known word to fill in for the unknown. If a student does not know a word, he/she may look at the picture on the page with the print discourse. The picture may then give away what the unknown word is. On the upper elementary school levels, it may be more difficult to use pictures located on the same page as the related print to identify unknown words. Why? There

are fewer pictures on sequential pages of text as compared to those written for the early primary grade levels.

f) configuration clues may be helpful to some students in that the shape/form of a word unknown to the reader may provide the necessary clues for identification of an unknown word met up within print discourse (Ediger, 2000, Chapter Six).

The reading teacher may record how well each student is achieving in the above six named categories of word recognition. What students individual are weak in needs to be diagnosed. Careful paying of attention to the diagnosed provides new objectives to the teacher as to what needs to be stressed in the reading curriculum as objectives of instruction. Based on diagnosis, the reading teacher selects areas of weaknesses. These weaknesses are followed by remediation as learning opportunities. The learning opportunities assist students to achieve objectives of instruction.

If students are taught to identify words only, then comprehension in reading might well be lacking. As supervisor of student teachers in the public schools for thirty years, the author has noticed individual pupils calling words and even doing this correctly, but not knowing or comprehending that which has been read. After all, the purpose of teaching/using word identification skills is to have students read with meaning (Ediger, 2001, 61-66).

There are different levels of complexity in guiding students to engage in more difficult kinds of thinking. Certainly, students need to read factual subject matter in a meaningful way. There are salient facts which students

need to glean from ongoing reading activities. Facts may be acquired for their very own sake and/or for building blocks in reading ensuing materials and thus engage in more complex levels of thought.

Second, understanding of facts then becomes a salient level of sequential complexity in reading. Understanding subject matter read indicates that meaning is being attached to ongoing selections in reading. Meaning theory is very important to stress in reading. To comprehend and to make sense of what has been read is of utmost importance! Otherwise, why read?

Third, using what has been learned is a doing approach. To use means to apply learnings acquired to a new situation. The level of application is used here in that what has been learned is used to achieve something else (Ediger, 2001, 59-66).

Fourth, an analysis of content read becomes important. To analyze is to separate into component parts such as facts from opinions, fantasy from reality, and accurate form inaccurate content. It is always good to analyze subject matter read to divide into relevant segments. Never is everything read of equal value because certain ideas are more salient than others, or main ideas are separated from subordinate content. Thus, the subordinate ideas support the main ideas read.

Fifth, creative reading is very valuable in that new, novel ideas result to the learner. Unique ideas accrue due to the student , for example, brain storming possible answers to identified problems pertaining to the new subject matter acquired. School and society expect originality of content to come about so that new inventions, procedures, and ideas accrue to

improve the human condition.

Sixth, assessing the worth of ideas read is also a valuable objective to attain in higher levels of cognition in the ongoing reading process. Each reader will draw selected conclusions on what value(s) the achieved ideas have in school and in society. Valuing the worth of something read will depend much upon how the reader will remember subject matter read. What is prized highly, then, will have its enduring values in remembering subject matter read. Vital ideas should be retained longer as compared to what is perceived to be unimportant (See Ediger, 2000, Chapter Seven).

Through teacher observation, the teacher may notice how well students individually are reading on each of the different levels of cognitive complexity.What is observed may be recorded on the individual student's checklist and/or through journal writing. Entries need to be dated for each student. The reading teacher may then teach and students must learn to overcome deficiencies. It is up to the student to shoulder responsibilities to become a better reader.

Portfolios and the Reading Curriculum

Informal appraisal results may become a part of the portfolio procedure in guiding more optimal student reading achievement. Portfolios, too, are also non-formal approaches to use for diagnoses and remediation, as well as determining sequential experiences for students. Diagnosis and remediation, initially, are non-sequential activities for students whereas a high quality reading curriculum stresses a student centered set of objectives, learning opportunities, and assessment procedures which are more seamless and make for continuous progress

in reading. Both, however, are necessary to aid student development and achievement in reading. Diagnosis and remediation must be emphasized when a student just did not get it , and before more optimal progress can be made, what is lacking must be made up. Portfolio items to be included in reading might well include the following:

1. cassettes of oral reading to notice fluency in reading.

2. snapshots of art work, construction projects, bulletin board displays, murals, dioramas, dramatizations, friezes, among others, to show comprehension of and in reading.

3. a video- tape indicating how well a student does in discussions, within the reading curriculum.

4. written products as indicators of reading achievement including outlines, summaries, conclusions, and notes taken on reading lesson content.

5. illustrations drawn to show comprehension of subject matter in reading.

6. diverse kinds and forms of poetry written to reveal what has been learned from ongoing lessons in reading. These poems may include rhymed verse (couplets, triplets, quatrains, and limericks), poetry involving syllabication (haiku, tanka, and septolets), as well as open ended poetry such as free verse. Poetry may increasingly emphasize complex items including alliteration, similes/metaphors, and onomatopoeia (Ediger, 1999, 278-279).

7. student journal writing to indicate what has been learned, what is left to learn, impressions from reading a given selection, as well as

indicating values acquired from reading.

8. notes pertaining to conferences conducted with the teacher after the completion of reading a library book when implementing an individualized reading program.

9. purposeful worksheets completed, dealing with reading instruction, during class time.

10. a sampling of homework activities such as writing a book report (See Ediger, 1999, 41-45).

Viewers and readers of portfolio items may then notice student achievement in reading. The entries in the portfolio provide a random sampling of the kinds of work done by students in reading to indicate achievement and progress. They provide data on specifics in terms of strengths and weaknesses in reading. Parents may have a much better opportunity to notice learners achievement here as compared to looking at a single test score given to indicate student achievement on a state mandated test (See Searson and Dunn, 2001, 22-26).

State Mandated Reading Tests

State mandated tests in reading are given in most states to students to notice if satisfactory progress is being made in achievement. Generally, the objectives for the test are available to teachers unless these are standardized tests, published by a commercial company. These mandated tests are developed and written, usually, under the auspices of the state

department of education. Teachers then need to select learning opportunities which assist students to achieve the stated objectives. The tests are aligned with these objectives. Thus, students may have experienced test items which relate directly to the stated objectives. Strengths given for using state mandated tests to ascertain student achievement in reading include the following:

1. they provide some information on how well a student is doing in reading.

2. they make comparisons on reading achievement among learners.

3. they give a numerical value on how well students are doing in reading. The numerical value is generally provided as a percentile. Grade equivalents, standard deviations, quartile deviations, and/or stanines may also be given as indicators. Percentiles, generally, are the easiest for parents to understand of all the statistical terms just mentioned to reveal learner progress.

4. they provide trend data on how well students do over a period of years when making yearly comparisons.

5 they may show an average weakness of students such as the latter being low in comprehension as compared to phonics in reading test results (Ediger, 1999, 12-16).

Items which need to be strengthened in the state mandated testing arena are the following:

1. validity may be quite weak in that the tests do not cover what has been taught.

2. reliability reveals a rather high standard error of measurement (SE Meas). This means there are definitely more weaknesses within a test as the SE Meas increases.

3. inadequate pilot studies of these tests have been made. Pilot study results pinpoint weaknesses within a test involving a random sampling of students taking the test, before it is used statewide. Printouts of student results in the pilot study might well reveal what needs to be corrected in terms of deficiencies in multiple choice items on the test.

4. a lack of information to the users/implementers as to how the norms of the test were determined.

5. special accommodations are lacking for the handicapped when taking the state mandated test.

6. vague, hazy test items are in evidence on the state mandated test.

7. averages from student test results are used to make comparisons among schools within a state. Averages do not tell about the individual student in terms of strengths and weaknesses faced in learning to read.

8. comparisons made among schools within a city may be very unfair due to lower income level schools achieving at a much lower level as compared to those in more affluent areas of a city.

9. test results are not too useful for teachers unless there is precision provided in terms of what the teacher should emphasize in teaching and what students need to learn for the latter to improve in reading.

10. students and teachers cannot go over the multiple choice test items in which incorrect responses were given by the learner.

State mandated tests have much need for improvement based upon the above named weaknesses. Each kind of error needs to be diagnosed and remedied in order to update and strengthen the testing movement. The testing of young children is being considered strongly and being implemented, in selected schools, on the kindergarten level of instruction (See Allen, 2001, p 1).

How should test results be used from mandated testing? Too frequently, punishment is used to get " schools in line with upping student achievement." There are a plethora of problems involved with this line of reasoning including

1. testing is only one way of students revealing that which has been achieved. Gardner (1993) lists eighth different intelligences possessed by diverse individuals. These are the following:

a) verbal such as in reading and writing as required in traditional testing situations.

b) space/artistic as in art products and processes to show what has been learned.

c) mathematical/logical with its implications for student revealing reasoning abilities in ongoing experiences.

d) musical/rhythmical. Here, students with this intelligences indicate learnings through the writing of lyrics and setting the words to music.

e) intrapersonal with the individual showing what he/she has learned due to this intelligence possessed.

f) interpersonal intelligence whereby these individuals reveal strengths in collaborative situations to show what has been learned.

g) bodily/kinesthetic intelligence involve those who best reveal learnings acquired through the use of the gross and finer muscles as in games played and in athletic prowess.

h) scientific in which the student reveals objective, not subjective, thinking in school experiences as well as in evaluation situations.

In viewing the above named intelligences, a reader might show what has been gleaned from reading by doing and making an art project, intelligences number two listed above, instead of responding to multiple choice test items as is true of most state mandated tests. The author when supervising student teachers in the public schools noticed a plethora of art projects developed by learners to show comprehension in what had been read such as an illustration completed by a student showing a farm scene pertaining to subject matter read. Or, three students having read the same short story from paperbacks developed a mural on urban life after having completed the related reading activity. A student made and used two sock puppets to do a dramatization, based on library book content read. There are many possibilities then in students doing art projects to portray characters in stories read.

2. test results for a single test should not determine a student's future such as in an exit test whereby a student may never receive a high school diploma for having failed a test. Even if the test can be taken over again, the stigma of failure can be great.

3. punishing schools for being educationally bankrupt penalizes low income area schools (See Ediger, 1999, 280-285).

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